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THE INFORMANT

An Interdisciplinary newsletter distributed by the Department of Linguistics and Critical Languages at Western Michigan University to provide information about developments in linguistics to students, staff, and friends in the field.

*DEFERENCE: PERSIAN STYLE

Reza Assadi
Graduate Teaching Assistant
Western Michigan University

"A very anxious pregnant Iranian woman decided to consult with her obstetrician. Soon it would be the eleventh month, and she had not yet delivered. Her obstetrician scheduled a caesarian. While performing the operation, he found two healthy male infants. Reportedly each infant was encouraging the other to go first, but neither of them wanted to proceed." This story is told by Iranians to poke fun at their own style of 'deference', called ta'arof.

Ta'arof is a generic term which denotes a myriad of verbal and non-verbal deferential behaviors in Persian. Hodge¹ and Beeman² classify ta'arof as a stylistic aspect of the Persian (Farsi) language inherent in its speakers.

Polite³ describes ta'arof as a highly developed series of complimentary behaviors, part social, part hospitable, which are practiced by Iranians and expected in return. Foreigners variously find the ta'arof of Persian speakers baffling, intriguing, frustrating, complex, and time consuming. Mehdivi⁴ points out that the word ta'arof has no equivalent in any of the Western languages.

Although there is no "grammar" of ta'arof, linguists, sociologists, and travelers have speculated that ta'arof is a culturally defined code of conduct of interpersonal behavior. Beeman⁵ relates that Iranians adjust their actions to the "norms" and "ethic" of a particular situation. Tyler, Taylor, Woolstenhulme, and Wilkins⁶ report that ta'arof is a "necessary part

¹Carlton Hodge, "Some Aspects of Persian Style," Language, 33 (1957), pp. 355-369.

²William Beeman, "Status, Style, and Strategy in Iranian Interactions," Anthropological Linguistics, 18 (1973), pp. 305-322.

³Alice Polite, "More Ta'arof on Streets, Less at Home, Befarmid," 7 No. 52 The Iran Times (March 24, 1973), p. 14.

⁴Anne Sinclair Mehdivi, Persia Revisited (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1964), p. 204.

⁵Beeman, p. 307.

⁶V. Tyler, James Taylor, Stephen Woolstenhulme, and Ernest Wilkins, Reading Between the Lines (Utah: Eyring Research Institute, 1973), p. IT-6.

of social intercourse and business dealings in Iran; without it communication seems blunt, brusque, and uncivil to Iranians." By strategically utilizing specific ta'arof syntax and semantics, the Iranian is able to control the communication situation in his or her favor.

According to Hodge⁷ and Bashiri,⁸ there are four types or levels of ta'arof, each of them congruent with a level of social stratification. The levels are "familiar," "polite," "deferential," and "royal." There are no hard and fast rules pertaining to the various levels. Hodge⁹ explains that there are distinct morpheme substitutions at each level.

It is Hodge's¹⁰ contention that Iran's professionals use "polite" speech within their own class and with business people, but use "deferential" speech when dealing with government officials. Business people resort to "deferential" speech when dealing with the professional stratum, but "polite" speech with bazaar workers, who are in the social stratum below. "Familiar" speech is preponderant within the family and among vendors, porters, etc. "Royal" speech is reserved for ranking leaders in the country.

Beeman¹¹ points out that ta'arof is "clearly marked." He maintains that the distinct verbal as well as nonverbal ta'arof patterns of communication depend upon the perception of the communicators. He asserts that the communicators assess whether they are of "equal" or "unequal" status, and whether they are "intimate" or "non-intimate."

Loeb,¹² Browne,¹³ Curzon,¹⁴ and others cite the fact that the roles of Persian communicators are quite unstable. The clever communicator will endeavor to manipulate interpersonal communication to maintain an "unequal" status.

Ta'arof can develop into either a "win-lose" or a "no-lose" situation. For example, ta'arof may be used to determine who first enters or departs from a room or car. It is quite common to observe a group of Iranians standing in front of an entrance. Instead of departing as soon as possible, they will stand there encouraging each other to proceed. The matter is finally resolved by the communication partner who has been flattered into leading the way.

There is no set time limit on a particular ta'arof exchange. Any Iranian host or hostess expects the meal and sweets which have been purchased and prepared to be refused by the guests. The host may insist several times, and the guests will politely decline. Eventually, the invited guests will accept the offer and enjoy hospitality.

Ramazani¹⁵ reports that many Iranians have gone hungry or thirsty when they have used their ta'arof strategies with a non-Iranian host or hostess. It is customary in Western cultures for the host to make at least one or two

⁷Hodge, p. 360.

⁸Iraj Bashiri, Persian: 70 Units, Vol. III (Minneapolis: Manor House, 1975), p. 41.

⁹Hodge, p. 361.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 363.

¹¹Beeman, p. 310.

¹²L. Loeb, Mechanisms of Rank Maintenance and Social Mobility Among Shirazi Jews. Unpublished manuscript. (New Orleans: American Anthropological Association, 1969).

¹³E. Browne, A Year Amongst the Persians (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

¹⁴N. Curzon, Persia and the Persian Question (London: Frank Cass, 1892).

¹⁵Nesta Ramazani, Persian Cooking; A Table of Exotic Delight (New York: Quadrangle, 1974), p. 219-220.

offers of food or beverages. The Westerner will interpret a refusal from the guest as a final decision, but this is not the case with Iranians. Iranians must refuse anything several times before finally accepting it.

Rewards, favors, possessions, or services may be gained through ta'arof. The speaker is hopeful that his or her offer will be declined; but once it is accepted the speaker is obligated to fulfill the commitment.

Many Iranian wives have added extra water to their soup and cut the portions a little smaller because their husbands' ta'arof invitations were actually accepted.

A ta'arof stalemate occurs when one of the communication partners is a stranger. Many Iranians can identify the various Persian dialects as well as differentiate literary, colloquial, or substandard Persian. While initially the syntax and semantics will be very polite, the ta'arof pattern may change as the communication partners become more familiar with each other.

Iranians may continue to practice ta'arof even when they are using foreign languages. For example, in circumstances where an Iranian encounters foreigners, the Iranian may simply translate the ta'arof expression and use it. This often leads to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns.

It is both embarrassing and surprising when a foreigner accepts the ta'arof. An Iranian acquaintance returning to the United States was met by an American friend at the airport. The American admired the Iranian's embroidered lambskin coat. The Iranian responded by a ta'arof statement implying that the American was welcome to have the coat. The American thanked the Iranian and departed with it. Another Iranian interceded on behalf of the coat's owner and explained to the American that the original offer was just a formality, not to be taken seriously. Henceforth, the coat's owner was more cautious about ta'arof.

Elwell-Sutton¹⁶ asserts that individuals learning Persian do not gain the ability to discriminate between formal and informal usages of the language. Usually only the polite form (formal) is stressed during Persian language instruction. Iranians are introduced to the colloquial and written ta'arof forms through formal language instruction in grade school and also family interactions.

Many regions of Iran have ta'arof idioms indigenous to those areas. For example, in the Eastern part of Iran, near Gonabad, the villagers generally respond to "Yes" by saying, Baele, šomaro xoda jaevab bede, which literally translated means "May God answer your 'yes'." Another idiom from the same area is used when the family is arranging a marriage. The family of the prospective bridegroom will say to the bride's family, Pesaere maro be qolumi bepaezirid, which literally means, "Accept our son as a servant."

In order to show deference to the speaker, the selection of the Persian pronoun is relevant. The speaker's humility is apparent by the deliberate use of substitutions such as bandeh (slave), chaker (servant), or jan nesar (a person who is ready to sacrifice himself/herself) for the first person singular pronoun man. "You and I" in the colloquial Persian form is expressed best with bandeh va sarker (slave and master) or bandeh va jenabe ali (slave and Lord). The second person plural pronoun šoma conveys politeness among equals as well as unequals, whereas the 2nd person singular pronoun is reserved for intimates only.

Hodge¹⁷ notes that the shifting from formal ("written") to informal

¹⁶L. Elwell-Sutton, Colloquial Persian (London: Cambridge University Press, 1943).

¹⁷Hodge, p. 365.

("colloquial") styles involves changes in consonants and vowels. For example, gorbanet is the spoken form and gorbane šoma is the written equivalent for "Thank you, I am willing to sacrifice myself to you." The most common ta'arof statement is befarmaid, which can be used in many different situations for "after you," "please help yourself," "you first," "take a seat," "please come in," "here you are," and "there you are."

Other ta'arof idioms in current usage are: piškeš for "you can have it"; gabeli naedare, for "it does not have much value for a person like you"; and nemixam betun zahmaet bedaem, for "I do not want to trouble you." These colloquial forms may be utilized in polite situations.

Despite the problems stemming from ta'arof, no plans have been developed to abolish or regulate its usage. The Persian language is much more than mere vowels, consonants, and grammatical style. It is a vital communication tool for social interactions in Iran and surrounding areas.

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IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

The Winter 1981 issue of THE INFORMANT will be devoted almost entirely to the Pahargarh (India) Caves Project, which is being conducted by Dr. D.P.S. Dwarikesh, Associate Professor of Linguistics at Western Michigan University.

NEW STUDENTS

Graduate Majors (MA-TCC)

Suradee Bhadrasiri (B.A., University of Bangkok, English)

Area of Concentration: English as a Second Language

Gil Burger (B.A., WMU, English/Linguistics; M.A., WMU, English)

Area of Concentration: General Linguistics

Pat House (B.A., WMU, English/Spanish)

Area of Concentration: English as a Second Language

Sharon Potter (B.A., Aquinas, English)

Area of Concentration: English as a Second Language

Lena Samuel (B.A., WMU, Business Administration)

Area of Concentration: General Linguistics

Kim Wood (B.A., WMU, German/European Studies)

Area of Concentration: English as a Second Language

Undergraduate Majors

*Susan Dailey

Ahmed Derbas (minor in English)

*Mary Kealy

Sally Kela (minor in Spanish)

*Kelly Maurice (minor in Portuguese)

Masako Ota (minor in English)

*Candi Rowson

*Donna Smith

* = Not yet counseled

Critical Language Minors

Kathy Kaakani (Arabic)

Connie Korzilius (Hebrew)

Kelly Maurice (Portuguese)

Jean Ogilvie (Chinese)

Joan Rishel (Japanese)

Caren Rothstein (Hebrew)

Sandra Santana (Portuguese)

Undergraduate Minors

Elizabeth Broughton (major in French)

Konne Ellenberger (major in English)

Susan Haghpanah (minors in Spanish & El. Ed.)

Mitsue Schmidt (major in German)

Fathiah Shamsuddin (major in English)

RECENT GRADUATES

April 1980

Mara Galens (Critical Language
Minor--Latvian)

Chigusa Kondo (Critical Language
Minor--Chinese), Magna cum laude

Starla Schwartz (MA-TCC--English as
a Second Language)

August 1980

Jill Baskins (Critical Language
Minor--Hebrew)

Kathy Benson (Critical Language
Minor--Portuguese)

Dale Goodwin (Major in Linguistics,
Minor in Japanese)

Hisako Miyaji (Undergraduate Minor)

Jean Ogilvie (Critical Language
Minor--Chinese), Summa cum laude

STUDENTS/ALUMNI ABROAD

Eileen Eckerle (Major in Linguistics, Minor in Japanese) was named Keio University Exchange Scholar for the year 1980-81 and is now studying at that University in Tokyo. The Scholarship, which is worth more than 1.6 million yen (about \$8,000), will provide Eileen with an additional year's instruction in Japanese. She replaces Ann Harper (B.A. August 1979, Minor in Chinese), who was the 1979-80 exchange student.

Anda Liberis (B.A. August 1972, Major in Linguistics, Minor in Latvian) is teaching Latvian Language and Literature to grades eleven and twelve in the Lettisches Gymnasium (Latvian High School) in Münster, West Germany. (She also taught there in 1972-73.) Anda, who normally teaches Latvian at the University of Toronto, has assisted or taught in the Latvian Studies Program at Western almost every summer since her graduation in 1972.

Jean Ogilvie (B.A. August 1980, Major in English, Minor in Chinese) was chosen as an exchange student at Nankai University, Peoples Republic of China, for the year 1980-81 and is now continuing her study of Chinese at that University. In order to accept the award, Jean had to give up a College of Arts and Sciences Merit Scholarship for the current year, but she was able to keep her Waldo-Sangren Scholarship in Spring/Summer 1980.

Starla Schwartz (MA-TCC, April 1980, Graduate Major in Linguistics) was also selected to be an exchange student at Nankai University, People's Republic of China in 1980-81 and is now studying Mandarin Chinese for the first time at that University. Starla taught in the Career English Program at Western from 1978-79 and tutored a Vietnamese family in English through the KVCC Vietnamese Program in 1979-80.

Wendy Risk Witt (MA-TCC, June 1977, Graduate Major in Linguistics) is now teaching English, Linguistics, and African Linguistics at the University of Burundi, East Africa, on a Fulbright Teaching Fellowship. From 1974 to 1976 she served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Gabon, West Africa. Wendy's husband, Dave Witt, accompanied her and will be teaching Economics and working at a Tropical Agricultural Research Station in Zaire.

STUDENT/ALUMNI NEWS

Jim Cogswell (Major in Linguistics) received Honorable Mention in the competition for the College of Arts and Sciences Merit Scholarships for 1980-81. Jim, who transferred to Western after attending the University of Illinois and Shimer College, is now the Undergraduate Student Representative to the Advisory Committee of the Department. Last Winter he received a Seibert Fund Award, and this Fall he has a grant from the Office of Instructional Development--both for his work with Dr. Dwarikesh on Archeological Linguistics.

Dale Goodwin (B.S. August 1980, Major in Linguistics, Minor in Japanese) is teaching Basic and Intermediate Japanese for the Department this Fall as a Critical Language Teaching Assistant while working on an M.B.A. in the Business College. Dale was an Honors College Intern in Linguistics last Winter semester for his work with Dr. Dwarikesh on Archeological Linguistics. He was married in August to Chiemi Nishimura, who taught Japanese for the Department from Fall 1976 to Winter 1980.

Hayami Kobayashi (Major in Linguistics) is teaching Japanese to Japanese children in Battle Creek for the Division of Continuing Education. Some of these children, whose ages range from four to twelve, have been in this country for two or three years and are beginning to forget their language--both spoken and written. Hayami is preparing them for their eventual return to Japan for further schooling. He is a former news reporter and editor for Asahi, one of the major newspapers in Tokyo.

Sally Mosher (MA-TCC, Graduate Major in Linguistics) has accepted an invitation to serve as the Graduate Student Representative to the Advisory Committee in the Department. Sally's area of concentration for the M.A. is English as a Second Language, and her Independent Research project is to develop a remedial course in Standard English Grammar for minority students. Besides her graduate work, Sally is teaching a section of Methods of Inquiry (195) for the College of General Studies.

Lena Samuel (MA-TCC, Graduate Major in Linguistics) has an Instructional Development Grant this Fall for assisting Dr. Dwarikesh in preparing materials for an anthology on Archeological Linguistics. Lena joined the Graduate Major in September, after completing a Business Administration degree at WMU. Previously she had attended the London School of Economics in Ceylon for two years and was an Editor, Executive Secretary, and Administrative Assistant in Calcutta.

NAME CHANGES

The masthead of THE INFORMANT now reads: "An interdisciplinary newsletter distributed by the Department of Linguistics and Critical Languages at Western Michigan University" This name change for the Department was approved by the Board of Trustees at their April 18 meeting to more accurately describe our mission at the University and to more adequately publicize our role as a "language" department.

Dr. Philip Denenfeld, then Acting Vice President for Academic Affairs, described the name change to the Board as "appropriate and long overdue": "In the case of the Department of Linguistics, the addition of Critical Languages to its name reflects a valuable function which that unit has served for over a decade. Students and other faculty members will now make that identification and be more aware of this specialized training and where to find it."

The name of another unit which the Department of Linguistics and Critical Languages helped to establish in 1975 was also changed in 1980. In September the Career English Program (CEP) became the Career English Language Center for International Students (CELCIS). This Center, which provides intensive ESL instruction at several levels in seven and one-half week sessions, is directed by Dr. Daniel P. Hendriksen, Associate Professor of Linguistics.

SECRETARIAL CHANGE

Sue Hampton, our faithful and popular secretary from August 1979 to March 1980, has transferred to the Custodial Division of the University and is now working on the East Campus. Before she left, Sue codified all of the secretarial duties in the Department, which should make it much easier for new

employees to step into the job. As a sendoff, eight of the teachers in the Department took Sue to lunch at the Gold Room and presented her with a going-away present. We all wish her much luck in her new, better-paying job.

Gail (Smith) Orta, our new secretary since April 17, came to us from General Studies (Social Science), where she was a student secretary while finishing up her undergraduate majors in Spanish and English. She had worked as a full-time secretary for General Studies (Humanities) in 1974-76, before she started work on her degree. Gail attended Loy Norrix High School in Kalamazoo and studied intensive Spanish at Guadalajara Summer School (Mexico), a division of the University of Arizona, in 1978. She was married to Juan Orta on October 19, 1980. She has a son Aaron, nine years old, who attends Oakland Elementary School. Good luck Gail, Juan, and Aaron!

RECORD ENROLLMENT

The Fall 1980 enrollment in the Department of Linguistics and Critical Languages increased 20% over that of Fall 1979--from 227 to 273. The enrollment in General Linguistics increased 16% (from 98 to 114), the enrollment in English as a Second Language stayed the same (at 69), and the enrollment in Critical Languages increased 50% (from 60 to 90). All of these enrollment figures either tie (ESL) or break the old records, as do the following: 84 students in the Nature of Language course, 78 students in the Basic Critical Language course, and 41 students in the Basic Arabic classes. We expect to break the 400 barrier for total enrollments this year as well as the 1600 barrier for total credit hours.

LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS FORUM

Mr. Robert Dlouhy, Coordinator of the Language and Linguistics Forum, is negotiating with several speakers for the 1980-81 lecture series. Mr. Mark Sundberg, Department of Psychology, gave "Answers to Some Questions about Verbal Behavior" on Thursday, October 23 in the tenth floor lounge of Sprau Tower. Other speakers may include Dr. E. Thomas Lawson, Chairperson of the Religion Department; Dr. Jack Michael, Professor of Psychology; Dr. D.P.S. Dwarikesh, Associate Professor of Linguistics; and Mr. Reza Assadi, author of the lead article in this issue. If you would like to give a talk, call Mr. Dlouhy at (38)3-0989.

EMERITI NEWS

We are saddened to report that our "western" correspondent, Miss Mathilde Steckelberg, former head of the Language Department at Western, died in Lincoln, Nebraska on September 6 at the age of 85. Miss Steckelberg was a German professor at Western from 1927 to 1961, during which time she had to put up with two members of the Linguistics Department, Bob Palmatier and Lalita Muiznieks, who were her students. They and all of the others who knew her will miss her greatly.

Our Kalamazoo correspondent, Dr. Hermann Rothfuss, who was a colleague of Miss Steckelberg's in the Language Department, writes that Nigeriens are not the only ones to singularize expressions involving paired body parts (see the lead article by Dr. Clifford J. Gallant in the Fall 1979 issue of THE INFORMANT). Americans have such odd expressions as "I got something in my eye," "He broke his leg," or "She dropped something on her foot," even though both members of the pair may be involved. We searched our brain, wrung our hand, crossed our leg, and thought about it--without any explanation forthcoming. Any suggestions?

DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS AND CRITICAL LANGUAGES

Winter 1981

GENERAL LINGUISTICS CLASSES

100 AA	Nature of Language	4 hrs.	8:00- 9:50	T Th	Dlouhy	*
100 HA	Nature of Language	4 hrs.	3:00- 4:50	T Th	LeBlanc	*
321 FA	Phonology & Morphology	4 hrs.	1:00- 2:50	T Th	Muiznieks	1129 BH
421 CA	History & Dialects	4 hrs.	10:00-11:50	T Th	Dwarikesh	1129 BH
512 KA	Principles of TESL	4 hrs.	6:00- 7:50	M W	Hendriksen	1128 BH
540 LA	Generative Grammar	4 hrs.	7:00- 8:50	T Th	Dlouhy	1128 BH
552 IA	Sociolinguistics	4 hrs.	4:00- 5:50	T Th	Dwarikesh	1129 BH
597 HA	Languages of Americas	4 hrs.	3:00- 4:50	M W	Palmatier	1129 BH
598 AR	Readings in Linguistics	VAR	(Apprv Appl Reqd)		Palmatier	409 SP

CRITICAL LANGUAGES CLASSES

302 AA	Basic Persian II	4 hrs.	8:00- 9:50	M W	Assadi	1128 BH
302 EA	Basic Korean II	4 hrs.	12:00- 1:50	T Th	Palmatier	*
302 FA	Basic Portuguese II	4 hrs.	1:00- 1:50	MT ThF	Palmatier	1128 BH
302 GA	Basic Hebrew II	4 hrs.	2:00- 2:50	M WThF	Palmatier	1128 BH
302 HA	Basic Arabic II	4 hrs.	3:00- 3:50	M WThF	Dwarikesh	1128 BH
302 IA	Basic Japanese II	4 hrs.	4:00- 4:50	M WThF	Palmatier	1128 BH
302 JA	Basic Chinese II	4 hrs.	5:00- 5:50	M WThF	Palmatier	1128 BH
502 AR	Inter. Persian II	4 hrs.	(Ling. 302)	*	Palmatier	409 SP
502 AS	Inter. Portuguese II	4 hrs.	(Ling. 302)	*	Palmatier	409 SP
502 AT	Inter. Arabic II	4 hrs.	(Ling. 302)	*	Palmatier	409 SP
502 AU	Inter. Japanese II	4 hrs.	(Ling. 302)	*	Palmatier	409 SP

*To be arranged

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